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R.I. Family Court Tugs Truant Issues Back To Schools

*Innovative program is
recognized by U.S.
government*

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The federal government recently recognized the state's new truancy court program as one of the seven best in the United States because it focused on the cause of truancy, not just its results, according to Chief Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah of the Rhode Island Family Court.

"We found that a high percentage of the total petitions in family court – more than 5,500 kids – could be traced to truancy as the first signs of trouble. When kids aren't in school, not only aren't they receiving an education, but they seem to be getting into legal trouble as well," said Jeremiah, who has previously implemented a similar court for drugs.

The truancy court, which started the first of the year, brings the family court system into the school, sending a magistrate into the school building once a week

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Truancy Program Gains Federal Recognition

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to monitor truant children, meet with parents, teachers and administrators, and match students and families with appropriate community resources as needed.

"The truancy problem has always been a thorny one for our schools to handle, as there are many reasons that a child doesn't make it to school, and our solutions have always fallen short of solving the problem. If a child was remanded to Family Court, the backlog of cases was such that it might have been several months before his case was heard. Sometimes, the school suspended a student for truancy – defeating the purpose of solving the problem by putting the student out of school for even more time. Our first priority is to find the cause of the truancy, and boost the child's chance of coming to school every day," said Judge Jeremiah.

The other problem with dragging the child into Family Court was that there is no good way to monitor the progress of the child afterwards, something the once-a-week magistrate visit to the school solves.

"After meeting with the appropriate parties, the student knows that the magistrate will be back every week to check on his attendance record, and is more likely to feel obligated to come to school than he would from a 'see you in six months' court ruling," said the judge.

Complex Problem

The program, which started in Providence's Hope High School, has now



Family Court Chief Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah has instituted a special "truancy court."

moved to middle schools in Providence, as well as schools in Pawtucket, Central Falls, Newport and Westerly, with Warwick and West Warwick coming aboard in the fall. David Raiche, superintendent of schools in West Warwick, said truancy is much more complex than people think.

"It can start in elementary school, when parents let kids stay home when they have a sniffle or on their birthday. Sometimes, elementary school kids have phobias such as fear of the boys room or a bully on the school bus that causes them to ask their parent's permission to stay home. One parent I talked to last year works all weekend, and keeps his child home every Monday just to spend time with him. These 'skipping school' habits then grow into middle school truancy," said Raiche, who petitioned Judge Jeremiah to bring the court to his city.

"While we can request a meeting with parents on a truancy matter, the court has subpoena power, so it can obligate the parents to attend. The court can also order parents and kids to participate in resource programs such as counseling, tutoring, social services or non-English language problems – something the school could only recommend. And the once-a-week monitoring by the magistrate in the school building is terrific," said Raiche.

Superintendent Maureen Chevrette of Central Falls agrees, adding that, many times, the parents are aware of the problem, but don't know what to do.

"The magistrate can order a meeting, mandate resources, and monitor the child's progress much more effectively than family court. This allows us to concentrate on education with minimal disruption while the court deals with the causes of the truancy," said Ms Chevrette. "In the old system, a kid could be absent another 30 – 40 days

between the time a case was remanded to court and the actual court date,

Judge Jeremiah cautions that this program, while very successful where it has been so far, costs money, and cannot expand without proper funding. The court has applied for a \$900,000 Federal grant, and will need more funding from the state legislature to grow.

"We will need to hire more magistrates in order to be in more schools, and we also need funding to support additional resource help for the kids," said the judge.

Newly-elected Rhode Island Bar Association President Vincent DiMonte, a family law practitioner, also agrees funding is important, and hopes the legislature reverses its recent record of voting down court spending initiatives.

"The bar association passed a resolution supporting the recent court bill to buy new computers, but the legislature did not allocate that funding. We hope they see the importance of keeping court programs like the truancy court funded – it's a true investment in our future," said DiMonte.

According to Judge Jeremiah, the truancy court comes to a city or town when invited by the school department, and he hopes that the day comes when the court is involved throughout the state. By keeping education, not school suspension, the priority of the program, the judge feels that there will be a significant reduction in the truancy problem in the future as a result of this program.